



## Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 19 | Issue 2

Article 5

Jan-2018

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Shahar Marnin-Distelfeld

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### Recommended Citation

Marnin-Distelfeld, Shahar (2018). A Space of Their Own: Arab Women Artists in Israel: Identity of a 'Double-Minority'. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 19(2), 65-83.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol19/iss2/5>

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## **A Space of Their Own: Arab Women Artists in Israel: Identity of a 'Double-Minority'**

By Dr. Shahar Marnin-Distelfeld<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This research paper focuses on the art of three women artists – Fatima Abu-Roomi, Samah Shihadi and Fatma Shanan. The research paper focuses on the work of three women artists who are 'double-minority'—Fatima Abu-Roomi, Samah Shihadi, and Fatma Shanan. Their 'double-minority' status comes from being Arab women, raised in patriarchal communities as Muslims (Abu-Roomi and Shihadi), or Druze (Shanan), who live and work among a Jewish majority in the Western-based environment of Israel. The objectives of this research are to point out the significance of their art as an innovative and unique voice within the Israeli art scene that reflect the conditions of young Arab women living in Israel today. Through analysis of their art, the research will aim to explore the artistic strategies, topics, and styles, as a means of negotiating their identity as a 'double-minority'. A feminist reading of the artwork will be followed by another theoretical point of view from the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott who coined the term "potential space". In different "potential spaces", the artists question cultural boundaries, national issues of colonialism, and gender roles. Choosing art as an ideological site, as well as a practical platform, allows them to widely investigate their identity in a complex minority situation and formulate a path for social change.

*Keywords:* Women artist, Palestinian art, feminist art, Israeli art, minority art, art and psychology.

### **Introduction**

The last decade has brought many Arab women artists to the front of the Israeli art scene (Abu-Shakra, 2015b, 37). This phenomenon—reflected in the number of art exhibitions, scholarships, and publications, is mostly fascinating in the field of plastic art more than in any other cultural arena. In this research paper, I am reading into the artwork of three women artists: Fatima Abu-Roomi, Samah Shihadi and Fatma Shanan, to decode their identity as a 'double-minority'—being Muslim and Druze<sup>2</sup> women in a Jewish dominated society, with a Western-based approach towards art. These women's social and political status is derived from being both women and Arab in a Jewish state (Fogel-Bijawi, 2010, 50).

The three artists—originally raised in the Galilee, are considered significant voices of contemporary drawing and painting in Israel. These young women, all in their thirties, all

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<sup>1</sup> Ms. Marnin-Distelfeld earned her Ph.D from the University of Haifa, Israel in 2012. Her dissertation dealt with representations of homemakers as they appeared in the popular Hebrew culture of Mandatory Palestine. Ms. Marnin-Distelfeld is currently on leave from Zefat Academic College where she teaches art history classes at the department of literature, art and music. Her studies focus on gender and art in Israel – past and present.

<sup>2</sup> The Druze are a religious community that arose from the Ismailiyah movement in Islam in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, and from the Fatimid Caliphate founded by that movement. Today the Druze live mainly in the Middle East and are concentrated in Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. Approximately 120,000 Druze live in Israel today, all of them are original residents of Palestine. To read more about the Druze in Israel see: R. Halabi, "Invention of a Nation: The Druze in Israel", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2014, vol. 49 (3), 267-281.

distinctive past students of Oranim College of Education<sup>3</sup>, have made their first artistic steps as independent and successful active artists, established their solo exhibitions during the past few years, thus stabilizing themselves as appreciated artists among the young generation of Israeli artists.

I would like to position these artists as part of a feminist project in contemporary art seeking to undermine gender divisions perceived as socially constructed axioms. (Dekel, 2015, 301). Abu-Roomi, Shihadi and Shanan join women artists all around the world who are consistently questioning these socially constructed axioms, suggesting a more personal, feminine agenda in their visual art. Their point of view is often based on their personal life experiences, stressing that the personal voice is at the same time a political one, a central concept promoted by feminist discourse in the second wave of feminism (Dekel, 2011, 25). All three bravely deal with their own bodies; create self-portraits, portraits of family members and friends, choices of much significance, which empower Arab women's authentic representation in the public sphere. In doing so, these artists re-legitimate 'Arab beauty' of a natural and authentic kind in the public space that is often provided with a false representation of Arab women, erected by the media (Nashef, 2012, 516). In the last fifteen years, Palestinian women artists have appropriated the image of the Palestinian woman, which up until then, was shaped by Palestinian male artists alone (Abu-Shakra, 2015b, 123).

It is common to define Arab women as oppressed both by the Arab-patriarchal society and by the Jewish state (Gal-Ezer, 2010, 103). In the artwork of Abu-Roomi, Shihadi and Shanan, the visual oppression that is expressed is mostly gender-based rather than national-based, and the minority situation regarding Israel is indicated in the artwork more culturally than nationally. The minority situation in regards to being Muslim and Druze women artists in the Jewish state of Israel is expressed through the visual language of the paintings rather than through the themes of the works. A noticeable dialogue between Arab-Eastern oriented images, symbols, ornaments, colors and Western-oriented techniques of painting and drawing, is a central site of negotiation, characterizing Palestinian art in general (Abu-Shakra, 2015b, 86-87). Both Palestinian women and men artists living in Israel struggle to define their unique artistic expression in a modern environment, influenced by the West and Global ideas, without losing their authentic voice. According to Abu-Shakra, Palestinian artists need to be aware of the complexity of identities in order to explore the colonial oppression of the Israeli culture over the minorities within it (including some Jewish groups). This awareness would strengthen and legitimize the creation of a special visual language of the Palestinian minority in Israel (Abu-Shakra, 2015b, 87). It seems that the three women artists are well aware of this situation and deal with it profoundly.

A feminist reading into the artwork of these three artists will be followed by another theoretical point of view—that of the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott, who coined the term "potential space" (Ogden, 2015, 121). Itamar Levi claims that the artistic experience—both for the artist and for the viewer—exists within a potential or a transitional space, using Winnicott's term (Levi, 2013, 10). I would like to follow Levi through identifying the process of making art and the artwork of these women themselves as linked to those "potential spaces". In these "potential spaces", where human creativity is taking place (Winnicott, 2000, 98), they negotiate crucial matters of their 'double-minority situation. In these "potential spaces", the artists can question

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<sup>3</sup> The art department at Oranim College of Education seems to position itself as a significant school of art in the Israeli art scene. It encourage women artists and cultivates gender and minority awareness and critique. The three women artists discussed in this article share this supportive and professional approach, which in my opinion was a springboard for their career.

cultural definitions and boundaries, gender roles, and sometimes even national issues of colonialism. Choosing art as an ideological site, as well as a practical platform, they can broadly investigate their identity in a complex minority situation.

In the process of making art, an inner world is being translated into an artwork with the latter embodying both the inner realm of the subject, the creator, and an external entity trying to find its legitimacy in the world.<sup>4</sup> This situation resembles the “potential space” experienced by a toddler who tries to negotiate her inner imagination and illusions within the real world—one of the most important and precarious stages of development. An infant grows into a child experiencing an increasingly separate sense of self in relation to a larger world of other people (Winnicott, 2000, 36-37). In this article, I suggest to examine the artwork as a stage in the development of a feminist voice, which is subtle but nonetheless significant. I argue that being an Arab woman in a Jewish dominated society renders the process of making art analogous to the “potential space” stage. All three women artists are living within Arab conservative communities, though most of their artistic life occurs within more Western and liberated surroundings. Unlike Arab women artists, who chose to live and work away from the original communities within which they grew up, these artists live and work close to their families and are strongly attached to their communities’ norms and perceptions (Abu-Shakra, 2015a, 6). The making of art helps maximize their range of expression, thus enabling them to create a space of their own where they can push cultural limitations and gain legitimate empathy and understanding. All three combine aspects of their ‘double-minority’ situation, accentuating their negotiable identities, and contributing to a specific feminist voice which ought to be heard.

## Methodology

The main methodology I used, which provided me with a wide framework, was iconography. This is a method developed by the art historian Erwin Panofsky, who looked for the meaning of images by referring to the understanding of signs and symbols in a work of art (Panofsky, 1957). Panofsky divided visual interpretation into three stages: primary-natural-pre-iconographic, secondary-conventional-iconographic, and intrinsic-symbolic-iconological. After realizing the natural and conventional meanings of an image, one has to decode the symbolic meaning that is “apprehended by ascertaining those underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion—qualified by one personality and condensed into one work” (Panofsky, 1957, 30). In the process of using iconography as a leading method, all aspects of interpretation were scrutinized and a set of questions were used regarding each work: What is the main image depicted? Where is it located? Is it a traditional setting for this image or an unusual one? What might the image convey to the viewer? The images themselves were a primary source of analysis by looking at all the formalistic components of the work. This is often defined as compositional concerns (Gilliam, 2012, 19).

Iconology, which Panofsky indicates in his methodology as the intrinsic stage of meaning, provided me with all sorts of information needed to widen the understanding of the images. First, technical concerns regarding both the production of the images and their visual effects, personal motivation, and tendencies of the artists were revealed to me through interviews with the artists as well as through previous research papers and exhibition catalogues. The interview, which is not

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<sup>4</sup> Ruthi Helbitz Cohen is an Israeli woman artist who interprets her artwork as being produced in a transitional space. See R. Helbitz Cohen, “Widening and Reducing of the Doubt Area in the Works of Ruthi Helbitz Cohen”, *Dvarim*, 1, 2008, pp. 1-12. (in Hebrew)

an available tool for the research of pre-modern periods, is central today, mostly in the contexts of minorities, when documentation and systematic learning is scarce (Zeitlian Watenpugh, 2013, 37-38). The interviews guided me in selecting a number of works out of their whole corpuses which embody the main aspects of the “potential space” in each artist’s works.

As a feminist art historian, I adopt a feminist approach of the researcher being open and involved in the experience of the interviewee, establishing a relationship that could potentially lead to a long lasting collaboration. (Krumer-Nevo et al, 2014, 16). I have known Abu-Roomi and Shanan since the beginning of their career as a teacher and curator, while Shihadi I only came to know in person from the interview. The interviews I had with the three were based on my knowledge of both their educational route and their works along the years. The interviews were mostly unstructured to create a comfortable atmosphere for conversation.<sup>5</sup> This included exposing my attitudes and goals, as well as some of my interpretations as an art historian. This feminist approach of being less ‘objective’ is well compatible for increasing the authenticity of the interviews (Krumer-Nevo et al, 2014, 17).

The premise of this research is that a visual image, as well as an artwork, is created in a “potential space” as a means of understanding and interpreting the world. Moreover, I believe that the visual image, more than a verbal message, allows a large room for uncertainty and inaccuracy. It legitimizes criticism resistance, and revolt that could be understood in more than one way. These features are exactly the ones to blur the boundaries between an inner self and an outer reality.

The goal of this study is to identify aspects of the ‘double-minority’ situation reflected in the three artists’ art. A profound reading of the images will discover whether there were topics, strategies, techniques, or other features common to all of them. To characterize their art, each one will be presented through several works alongside an analogous look attempting to identify influences and common aspects.

### **Fatima Abu-Roomi: Not Under Cover**

Abu-Roomi was born and raised in Tamra, an Arab town in Western Galilee in Northern Israel. As the oldest of several children, she supported her work-weary family, and had a tough childhood (Interview with Abu Roomi, 2011). Abu-Roomi has been struggling to pave her independent path and to establish her artistic life after successfully graduating from Oranim. “Art gained freedom for me”, she says (Interview with Abu Roomi, 2011). Negotiating gender boundaries has been Fatima Abu-Roomi’s focus since her early career. From her first created images until the later ones, she has always been aware of gender objectifications and of gender-biased perceptions an image might evoke. Gender has been a major concern for her, dealing with family roles and relationships in her works. As will be presented shortly, she strives to problematize essentialist approaches regarding patriarchal authority of men over women by juxtaposing realistic figures of her family in enigmatic positions, creating unexpected situations and relationships.

Portraits have been her core work, especially self-portraits and portraits of her family members. These works often contain domestic objects, various fabrics and traditional ornamental accessories related to Muslim Arab culture, to which she belongs. A strong tension characterizes

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<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank all three artists Fatima Abu-Roomi, Fatma Shanan and Samah Shihadi for sharing their life stories, thoughts and ideas regarding their artwork with me. I have visited all exhibitions of the three artists in Israel over the years, and keep in touch with them. I also shared this article with the three of them to get their permission for publishing the images, as well as their remarks on the work itself.

her works in which the figure is depicted realistically, usually situated in the middle of the composition, but at the same time detached from reality. Her realism is a first-sight illusion, which breaks apart by a lack of context and pictorial dark coloring of the backgrounds. In her portraits, she focuses on a central figure, committed to its detailed depiction. The figure is rendered familiar and un-familiar at the same time.

Abu-Roomi's portraits involve significant relationships with the veil. The veil – *Hijab* in Arabic, is used in the Muslim world by women to cover their face or body as a way of expressing modesty. The veil is considered a shield for women from male gazes and therefore religion suggests that girls start wearing a veil from puberty on (Abu-Shakra, 2013, 249). In Abu-Roomi's works, she is undermining this religious perception by suggesting a different point of view regarding the veil. In her works, not only the veil covers the woman but also scarfs of all sorts and kinds. The artist examines the fabrics in relation to body poses and gestures, as if she were an actress trying out her costumes before coming on stage.

In several works, she poses herself looking straightforward into the viewer's eyes with most of her face covered. Her big wide-open eyes are so expressive one cannot avoid the feeling of a strong-minded woman resolved to convey a message without words. In one of her strongest self-portraits (fig. 1 left), her eyes capture our attention for being absolutely determined, yet at the same time looking threatened. She takes a further step forward displaying her hand holding the veil. This relatively minor addition profoundly suggests the option of unveiling the face, which automatically leads to the forbidden option of speaking up implied by the artist.

Farid Abu-Shakra states that Abu-Roomi is not telling only her private story but also that of many Arab women subjected to male power and authority by being oppressed under the rule of a male guardian—be it the father, older brother, or husband (Abu-Shakra, 2012, 8). In the words of the artist, "The *hijab*, decorated and ornamented with sparkling zircons, serves here as a symbol of the barriers placed on women by society, a covering that keeps women out of sight and palpably displays the contrast and mutual presence of beauty and pain" (Abu-Shakra, 2013, 249). Abu-Roomi's realm of making her portrait embodies a contradiction between two values: beauty of fabric design, colorful zircons and a face of a woman, versus oppression enforced on women to obey the rules of tradition to hide and exclude their body from the outside world.

In another self-portrait, the white veil covers her head tightly implying a wounded organ, or even a dead body (fig. 1, right). It wraps the face so hermetically, leaving no choice for the woman to breathe. Additionally the pose of the shoulders sticks forward, which could even imply tied arms and hands. Ironically, here too, sparkly zircons decorate the edge of the cloth, seen across the face below the eyes and crossing parallel to the lips. The blue and white of the painting could imply a national connotation of the flag of Israel as a reference, but even without it the duality of the veil image is clear. Abu-Roomi follows other women artists using the veil as both a symbol of enslavement and resistance to cultural colonialism (Sperber, 2012, 59). The nature of enslavement the artist wishes to arouse is the absurd use of the veil. It is being imposed on women by a male-dominated religion in order to protect them, while it is, in fact, reducing their physical presence of the body in the public sphere. Cultural colonialism is implied by the veil simply being repeatedly painted as a prominent feature of a young Muslim female that the artist wishes to represent. Dressed up in various veils, in different poses, the artist accentuates an identity that is typically Muslim, the typical "other" within Israeli society as well as the Israeli art scene. By creating this appearance of an iconic female Muslim depicted in conventional Western poses, the artists questions Western cultural values regarding women's status in society.



**Fig. 1: Fatima Abu-Roomi. Left: *Self-portrait with Veil*, 2011, oil and zircons on canvas, 50X50 cm. Right: *Blue-and-White Self-portrait*, 2010, acrylic and zircons on canvas, 100x90 cm**

While the artist's portraits represent the Arab woman, her father's portraits do the same for the Arab man. In many portraits of her father, whom she has been painting since her graduation project up until her recent show, Abu-Roomi challenges gender roles through the symbol of the veil, and other costumes. Her father poses for her, she stages him, then takes a picture, and finally works on the painting while observing the photo (Interview with Abu Roomi, 2011). Her father's undisputed support has been a significant factor in Abu-Roomi's ability to develop her artistic freedom. As was shown in previous research, the support of a father is crucial in circumstances of a unique daughter tending to choose an exceptional route in her life course, contradicting conservative norms and perceptions (Vinner-Levy, 2006, 326-327).

In her paintings, her father's figure is gently covered, partly or wholly, with a cloth or veil (fig. 2, left). The painting eludes a byzantine icon, with the bearded man in a contemplative profile placed against a golden ornamented background. His face is partly covered which is not customary for a man. Abu-Roomi takes him out of any context, and relocates him as an actor in her illusionary play. On the one hand, the image is realistic; tempting the viewer to get closer and touch, but on the other it is un-real, distant from reality, a "potential space" for the artist to be in. Another painting (fig 2. right) is even more subversive with her father's image fully covered by a bridal veil. Abu-Roomi violates gender roles (Guilat, 2012, 5) as she creates a sad duality of a crushed masculinity and a womanless femininity, since the bridal veil is covering no bride. She problematizes essentialist attitudes towards the dichotomy between femininity and masculinity, a close strategy that the Palestinian Anisa Ashkar uses in her works (Dekel 2015, 301).





**Fig. 2: Fatima Abu-Roomi. Left: *Portrait of the Artist's Father under a Veil*, 2013, oil on canvas, 60X60 cm. Right: *Man's Silhouette with Bridal Vail*, 2011, oil and zircons on canvas, 100x90 cm**

In a distinctive painting *Tame Falcon* (fig. 3), gender perceptions are attacked again. This is an enigmatic work, resembling surrealist paintings in its blank background, fractured human body, detailed images and unexpected composition. The bird, realistically painted but surrealistically displayed, detached from nature, with an artificial head cover, is perched on the arm of an unseen woman with red nail polish. The falcon symbolizes male dominance in Arab society since falconry, the training of hunting birds, is traditionally a manly habit in the desert lands (Abu-Shakra, 2015a, 12). However, like in the previous painting, the power of masculinity, embodied in the bird's presence, has been eliminated by the cover on its face and its claws being shackled.



**Fig. 3: Fatima Abu-Roomi, *Tame Falcon*, 2012, oil on Canvas, 80x70 cm**

Abu-Roomi creates an “ex-territory” (Guilat, 2012, 6), a “potential space” in which she herself, her family members, and the world surrounding her are being examined through art. She plays diverse characters and makes her father play others as well. Even the falcon plays a role being covered and shackled, taken from its natural habitus. She creates a space, separate from



patriarchal mechanisms in which rules could be twisted. In this imaginary realm, the woman artist is positioning herself as the hunter of the bird, instead of men. The viewer can feel the power of both the artist and the hidden woman, but cannot discover the episode behind the scene. It remains a mystery, emphasizing the symbolic effect of the falcon. The image contains a reflection of a manly phenomenon, and a rejection of the meaning of that phenomenon, a strategy enabling the viewer to be provoked but not overwhelmed. At the same time, her strategy enables the viewer to be provoked, but not overwhelmed.

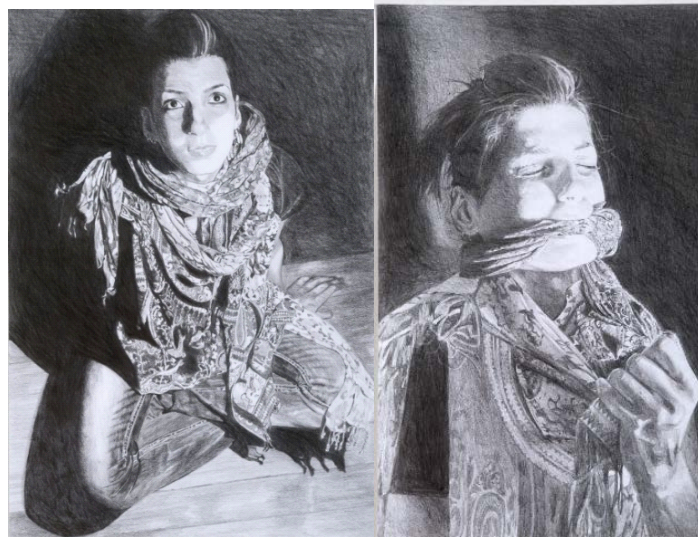
### **Samah Shihadi: A Scream in a Drawing**

Shihadi was born and raised in Sha'ab, a village in the Galilee, and currently lives and works in Haifa. Like Abu-Roomi, she graduated with honors from Oranim College of Education and then continued as a graduate student of art in the University of Haifa. Shihadi is completely devoted to drawing, using no color in her art. Her installation objects do contain other materials, as we shall come to see later in the paper. Shihadi's series *Anonymous* (fig. 4), is an appropriate example of how artwork could be perceived as a "potential space". Shihadi is acting out herself as if she were looking in a mirror: in a few cases, she is looking straight into the viewer's eyes, determined and strong; in others, she is covering her mouth either with her hands or with a scarf. In all the drawings, the figure seems disturbed and reserved. These self-portraits echo a "potential space" for the artist. The figure depicted is her own realistic image, but the pretended situations and the black or white surfaces behind her shown as a 'non-space', convey a state of mind incarnated into an art piece. The definition of "potential space" as a blend of inner reality and an objective one—without those two being contradictory to one another, is exactly what we feel while looking at these works. All alone her figure captures most of the composition, leaving a small space for the background. The space is unidentified and the focus is on the lone figure.

In one drawing (fig. 4, left), the artist's figure is seated in the center, wearing jeans and a T-shirt, with her hair revealed and her body partly wrapped by an ornamental scarf. Here she has designed a unique juxtaposition of an ornamental, traditional-like scarf and casual sexy clothes. Whereas this appearance reflects the artist's style, one could read it as a postcolonial adaptation of an Arab woman dressed in a 'Western' manner, not looking 'Arab' at all. Some ambiguous looks of hers enable her to gain more respect from the colonized society without losing her Arab identity at the same time (Nashef, 2012, 521). Her eyes are wide open, gazing at something or somebody up front. This position of a young woman sitting on a floor indicates a sense of subordination. Using dark areas versus light ones, the artist poses a contrast between a shadowed corner, where her figure is portrayed and the lit area whose light seems to be emanating from either the unseen figure or an invisible source of light in the right-hand bottom corner.

In another piece of that series (fig.4, right) the figure is represented with the same scarf, wrapping her neck, reaching her mouth and blocking it. The motif of a blocked mouth appeared in the works of Abu-Roomi as well, where a quiet scream is expressed, representing the authentic female voice that is being silenced. With her eyes shut this time, and her left hand a bit bigger than it should be realistically, trying to untie the scarf, the feeling conveyed is that of a helpless prisoner unable to express her feelings. Light and dark—referred to as *chiaroscuro*, renders the situation dramatic, calling the viewer's attention, not letting him/her stay calm. The dazzling light falling on the girl's face makes it look like a door was suddenly open by someone coming to free that woman.

The series *Anonymous* was created in a period when the artist had gone through a complicated situation and felt her voice was not heard (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). She felt all alone struggling with the need to stand up for her genuine and exceptional feelings and beliefs. This brave series, formed almost as a personal diary, is both dramatic and theatrical. The facial expressions are vitriolic and harsh, and the contrast between dark and light areas is powerful. The series was made with the help of a male photographer, who contributed to the staging of the figure. “He might have influenced these works”, admits Shihadi, probably accentuating a dramatic atmosphere and tone (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). *Anonymous* was the first project by the artist, which explains the direct images and the textured rough drawing. The scream is well documented; however, it was about to become milder in the later works of Shihadi.



**Fig. 4: Samah Shihadi, from the *Anonymous* series, 2012, pencil on paper, 23x33 cm (each)**

In another work by Samah Shihadi, which echoes the *Tame Falcon* by Abu-Roomi, a rooster is depicted, his legs tied and held up-side-down by a woman seen from her back (fig. 5). It is powerless yet needs to be carried by the woman. The rooster represents the male gender, shown as a burden on the woman’s back, even when she had succeeded in eliminating his potential power (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). Being a symbol of men, the criticism on a society dominated by men over women is clear. Like in Abu-Roomi’s falcon painting, the woman is faceless, as if her act towards the rooster cannot yet legitimize revealing her face, pointing at a specific identity.



**Fig. 5: Samah Shihadi, *Untitled*, 2014, pencil on paper, 70x59 cm**

Another aspect of the “potential space” is the attitude towards the physical space itself as it appears in drawings and paintings. In *Lying Down* (fig. 6), Samah Shihadi is depicted with her body horizontally crossing the composition in the middle. Against gravitation, with minimal clothes on and shut eyes, the young female body is set upon the viewer. The only image to imply natural forces of the real world is the hair loosely falling. This drawing forms a surreal space, containing a hyper-realistic image. “This drawing is like a dream”, says Shihadi. “In many works I let myself draw a dream-like situation, something a little detached from reality” (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). The figure is the artist herself, and she defined it as “stuck”. “I’m in a stage in my life, where I’m feeling stuck: stuck between being independent and still feeling rooted in my society” (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). The female figure is dressed in fashionable clothes, those forbidden to young Muslim women, revealing a lot of her body.

This is a brave statement striving to problematize traditional stereotypes of a female lying figure being watched by a male gaze. The iconography of a female nude on the couch, well established in art history, but strongly criticized by feminist discourse as a symbolic act of male repression (Dekel, 2011, 27), is replaced here by an iconography which makes use of a female lying figure aimed to unease the gaze, to question the position of lying down itself. A position expected to be the essence of comfort and tranquility turns out to be a surrealistic image, existing in a space that is not real, a ‘non- space’. The body is alive and yet could be read as dead, floating in mid-air, since its flatness could imply a stretcher in use to carry the dead. The “potential space” stands for the possibility of creating a realistic body within a surrealistic space to undermine perceptions towards the female body taken out of its normal context, both in life and in art. This silent image embodies resistance to the natural order and to the cultural one as well (Yahav, 2015).



**Fig. 6: Samah Shihadi, *Lying Down*, 2014, pencil on paper, 208x151 cm**



**Fig. 7: Samah Shihadi, from *Glasses Series*, 2014, pencil on paper, hard paper and pins, 7.5x7.5x8.5 cm**

In a series *Glasses*, of twelve paper cups, punched by metal pins and drawn in the inside bottom part, Shihadi presents a surprising installation (fig. 7). “The number twelve stands for the age when Muslim girls are expected to start praying and cover their bodies”, explains Shihadi (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). Her self-portraits appear in different positions, completing a whole circle from facing forward, through all angles and facing backwards. We get to see her face as if it was turning around while being interrupted by the pins and at the same time not hurt at all. The cups and the pins evoke a sexual connotation. Whereas the cup could be a symbol of the female vagina, the pins could represent contradictory entities, implying different readings of the works: they could be interpreted as a barrier blocking the way, protecting the woman’s body (which was the artist’s idea) but they could also represent the phallus, being a massive threat to the female body. Instead of grabbing a disposable cup of water, the cup was turned into a prickly object that is out of touch. The moment we notice the cups is the moment we come to understand the profound significance of the work: what we expect to be familiar and easily accessible becomes out of reach. This is a metaphor for the male gaze at the female body. Shihadi would not let us hold the cup and

have a drink, as she would not let men attack a woman's body, her own body. Using paper cups and metal pins, materials taken from everyday life, the drawn portraits inside the cups create the work of art in a "potential space". We identify the materials and the realistic portraits as familiar images and objects, but at the same time we are forced to perceive them differently from what we are used to. Shihadi's complex reality is being reshaped through her art work. She feels frustrated, living between the cultural obligation to follow men's decisions and fulfill men's needs and the strong sense of independence which leads to a desire to free herself from men's oppression.

The choice to use her own body in so many works, which is a conscious inspiration of Frida Kahlo, resulted from a wish "to remain accurate" in the message she is anxious to communicate (Interview with Shihadi, 2016). Shihadi, like Abu-Roomi, contributes to create a significant group of women artists who focus on their own body (Jewish or Arab) in Israel today: Anisa Ashkar, Raida Adon, Sigalit Landau, Merav Hyman, to mention a few prominent ones. Focusing on the female body has become a noticeable image in the Israeli art scene, widely discussed by a community of women artists, not only Arab.<sup>6</sup> The use of the artists' own body, initiated in the United States and Europe at the 1970s, has been typical of feminist artists in Israel as well, who have felt the need to create art as close to their own experience as possible, as modeling the very act of expression (Dekel, 2010, 58).

### **Fatma Shanan: A Displaced Carpet**

Shanan was born and raised in the Druze village of Julis, in Northern Israel, lives and works in Tel-Aviv.<sup>7</sup> She studied art at Oranim College of education and in the studio of the Israeli painter Elie Shamir. Shanan recently won the Shiff prize for figurative art, after the judges defined her as "one of the interesting young artists of Israeli art" (Littman, 2016). Shanan's paintings engage in cultural matters of the domestic sphere versus the public sphere, and of women's space, role and belonging within her community. The paintings also investigate issues of religious limitation within her society, and encounters of 'east' and 'west' entities. Unlike the two artists discussed above, Shanan does not focus on self-portraits or on portraits in general. Physical space transformed into a two-dimensional image is a main element in Fatma Shanan's paintings. At first glance, her paintings look like realistically depicted everyday moments of life in her village. Shanan creates a personal village view of her own relying on familiar objects and spots, and using her family members and neighbors as her figures. The image that is most associated with her works is the carpet, not a specific one, but oriental carpet, or with the essential pre-condition of it being used (Interview with Shanan, 2013). The carpet is an elaboration of herself, being placed indoors or out. She takes the carpet on a journey, and aims to point out at significant junctions along the way. This is a journey of a young woman struggling to construct an identity (Blumensohn, 2015, 98).

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, a group named "A Studio of Your Own" was founded, first of its kind, to enable religious Jewish women artists to express themselves regarding topics less discussed so far, as femininity and personal experiences of women within religious communities. See: D. Sperber, "Body and Sexuality in Works by Women Artists, Members of Studio of Her Own", *Tseno Ureno*, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Department of the Arts, 2017, pp. 142-149.

<sup>7</sup> The Druze community in Israel is viewed as a minority within a minority: a religious minority within the Arab minority, which arose from the Islam. In this article, I examine characteristics of the art of Shanan as being both a woman and a member of a minority group, regardless of the controversial identity of the Druze in relation to the Muslim community. To read about the construction of Druze identity in Israel See: R. Halabi, "Invention of a Nation: The Druze in Israel", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 2014, vol. 49 (3), 267-281; K. M. Firro, "Reshaping Druze Particularism", *Journal of Palestinian Studies*, xxx, 3, 2001, pp. 40-53.

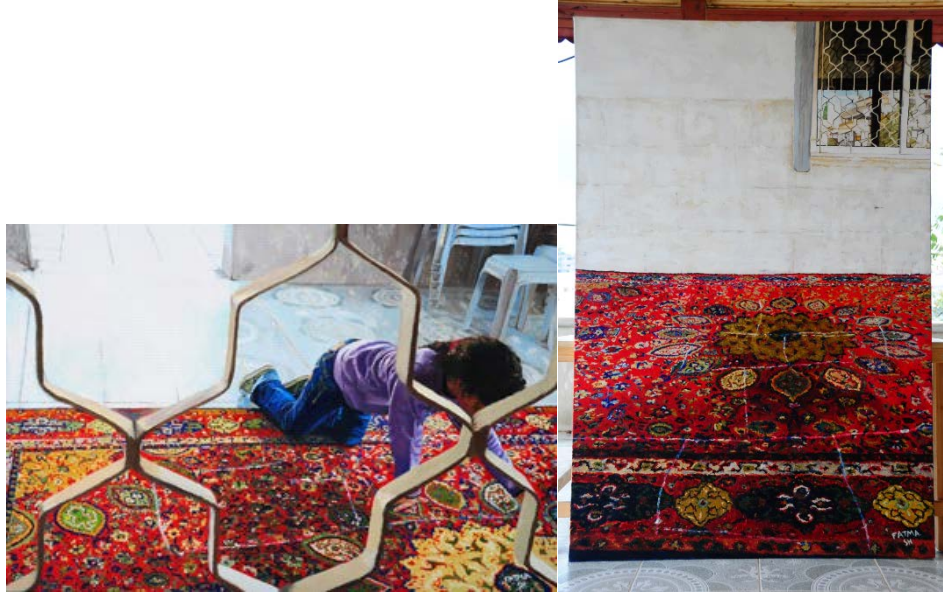


The process of making art for Shanan, as well as the paintings themselves, suggest a “potential space” or “an alternative realm of order and security” (Blumensohn, 2015, 98). In an early work, (fig. 8) two carpets are spread outside on a pavement in the area right before the yard gate. Their location is surprising, implying the mixture of indoors and outdoors, but the geometrical composition of the house, the fence, the gate and the carpets with the harmony of colors—all make the carpets’ displacement almost unnoticeable. All objects in the painting—concrete walls, stone blocks, trees and the carpets, look realistic in texture, color and space illusion.



**Fig. 8: Fatma Shanan, *Untitled*, 2011, oil on canvas, 110x120 cm**

In the work *Manar 2* (fig. 9, left) a girl is drawing the lines required by a game called in Israel “klass” (“hopscotch” in the USA) on the carpet with white chalk. Here it is not certain whether what we see is an outdoor or an indoor scene. White lines drawn on a carpet, and the uncertain location of that carpet are repeated in several works, including *A Carpet and A Window* (fig. 9, right).



**Fig. 9: Fatma Shanan. Left: *Manar 2*, 2010, oil on canvas, 100X80 cm. Right: *A Carpet and A Window*, 2010, 100x150 cm.**

In this painting, the sharp white lines making squares stick out from the colorful floral pattern of the carpet, thus contrasting the floral-like pattern of the bars. The player's role is to bring back the rock thrown by her, skipping on one foot without stepping on the lines. The essence of the game is the ability to complete the assignment being restricted by the drawn lines. This game is all about rules and limitations with the lucky player following those rules. The carpet is also a means of limitation. It defines limits of space. For a family, this kind of carpet occupies the main space of the living room. For the praying Muslim or Druze, the carpet defines the praying area. What does the carpet mean to the girl? What does it mean to the woman artist?

This constitutes an act of transgression: the carpet, which traditionally belongs to the house, the home or a sacred religious space, is deliberately displaced on the asphalt yard outside the house. Instead of being aired, it is being soiled by the drawing. The very symbol of domesticity is being corrupt by the traditional guardian of domesticity—a girl and a woman (the artist herself). The reclining position of the drawing girl echoes that of a man, praying. All three elements demonstrate a critical point of view regarding the boundaries of a traditional community in which the artist has been brought up. This is a defying act aiming to demand the right to determine her own identity the way she perceives it, to freely utter her voice. Being a Druze, Shanan has experienced the complex position of a distinctive religious group, often described as a minority within the Arab minority. The question of identity has been one of much debate among Druze in Israel, with some identified themselves as Arabs and others—as Israelis (Halabi, 2014, 270).

In her later works, Shanan continues to construct her personal pictorial language mostly through the carpet image. While functioning as an aesthetic element, a source of pleasure for every painter, it requires a profound observation. Gideon Ofrat stresses the literary bond between the Hebrew Word for carpet *Shatiach* and the word for territory *Shetach* (Ofrat, 2014). The carpet, *shatiach*, occupies a territory, *shetach*. This linkage between the carpet and the territory invites a colonial reading of Shanan's works. In a series of works describing carpets in fields, we get several similar compositions, with different relationships between the three main elements: landscape,



carpet, and people (mainly girls). In one painting (fig. 10, left) two girls are dragging the carpet like bulls dragging a plough, in another—girls are rolling it up before taking it away (fig.10, right).



**Fig. 10: Fatma Shanán . Left: *Razan and Adan 1*, 2012, oil on canvas, 100x150 cm. Right: *Razan and Adan 2*, 2012, oil on canvas, 80x100 cm.**

The plough image, as I read it, conveys the idea of cultivation which accompanies settling on the land and belonging to it. The girls, taking the place of traditional bulls, hold and drag the carpet as if it were a plough preparing the field for planting. But here, the field had already been harvested, and all that remains is the movement of the human plough paving a route, signing an unclear direction.

If the plough image implies the idea of settling down, the rolling up of the carpet, on the other hand, gives the opposite idea of moving, leaving, going away. Artists have always been painting landscapes as a matter of appropriation (Guilat, 2010, 70). The land belongs to us therefore it is a source of life and pride. This has always been a central role played by art as a national agent. In Shanán's works, it is not landscape itself but the relationship between it and the carpet, which could be interpreted as a means of establishing an identity.



**Fig. 11: Fatma Shanán, *Bait 3*, 2014**

In a painting *Bait 3* (fig.11) a quilt-like composition is set on a flat roof in the middle of a village. The carpets serve to create a mystery of -the typical moment of a social gathering in a village. There is some tension between the boys focusing on something in the middle, with the girls sitting remotely, watching them from the edge above, without touching the carpets. Do these carpets stand for different fields with various crops? Are they representatives of the cultivated world, where women do not belong? There is a strong sense of a sky-high look, a view from above being implied here: a certain suggestion meant to take an elevated point of view floating over the very familiar surroundings so as to profoundly understand it.

Shanan's carpet represents more than "a world within a world" (Bartos, 2014). It functions as a metonym not just generally for a "world" but more specifically for a home to her, as a room of her own. As such, she takes the liberty to "build" an alternative-metaphoric house using the motif of the carpet. The process of making art for Shanan is another buttress supportive of the idea of the carpet as an "alternative metaphoric house", coexisting with her real house and life. At first an idea of composition crosses her mind, when she draws the sketch of it, then she arranges the technical details, chooses a carpet (still in use or not any more), invites her family members to be her extras, then they take a truck and drive to the field near her village (Interview with Shanan, 2013). At a certain point, she stops and stages them together with the carpet, then she takes pictures of her composition and finally they roll up the carpet to return it home. Now she paints in the studio observing those pictures. The whole adventure of a painting seems like a metaphoric attempt at appropriating a house/room of her own. This attempt is a continuous ritual as she returns to the landscape repeatedly. The real space becomes a "potential space", where an inner creative idea coexists with the actual physical space in which she executes her artistic creation.

Shanan is out on a journey to formulate a self-defined adulthood. The carpet serves as an emblem of traditional Arab society. It embodies the heart of the house/home with its customary values. But while relocating the carpet in the least expected places for it to be, being 'soiled' instead of remaining clean, she is performing an act of voicing herself—both as an artist and as a woman in the Druze society as well as in the Israeli one. She does so within the boundaries of her society but also using the tools she has obtained from Western culture, leaning on the techniques of oil on canvas and on realistic horizontal landscape compositions. The contradiction between a Western landscape painting, based on a long historical heritage of men as artists and the carpet as a signifier of feminist art, is well established in Shanan's works. Whereas carpets are present in men's works, including the Druze artist Asad Azi, whom could be of influence on Shanan, carpets are mostly associated with the works of second generation feminist artists of the 1970s, especially Miriam Shapiro and the Pattern and Decoration Movement, which contributed significantly to undermine male-dominated perceptions on art (Dekel, 2006, 48). Therefore, Shanan's carpet must be read in a feminist context echoing the history of both carpets being created by women and carpets as represented in feminist art works. This perception becomes elaborated with the carpet being a signifier of a culture and of a self-negotiating identity.

## Conclusion

In this article, three women artists were presented through the lenses of being a 'double-minority'—being an Arab in a Western Jewish society and being women in conservative, male-dominated communities. The Israeli art has founded itself through the years as Western oriented regarding institutions as museums and art academies. Postmodernism has deconstructed the homogeneous trend, widening the spectrum of art-making to include a variety of sub-cultures.

Arab art is one of those sub-cultures, characterizing in topics, materials and techniques (Abu-Shakra, 2015b, 83-85). The uniqueness of Arab art in Israel is located where Western trends encounter Arab tradition. In addition, Arab women artists have gone further to deal with this encounter blended with gender issues, often absent from the art of their men counterparts.

All three make use of Western art education and artistic knowledge and techniques blended with Eastern-Arab aesthetic traditions in their works: Abu-Roomi combines accurate oil painting and Western portrait heritage with materials like fabrics and zircons belonging to everyday life of people, especially women, around her. Shihadi draws accurately with pencils on papers, minimizing her images, devoted to authentic portrayal of Arab women and men of her world, including her own portrait. Shanan uses the Western landscape tradition of oil painting to create compositions, whereas her main image is an Eastern ornamented, colorful carpet being a signifier of the Eastern and Arab home. The element of occupying a territory by the carpet echoes the question of a physical and mental belonging, which is crucial for any minority.

All three artists are undermining gender roles; When Abu-Roomi and Shihadi portray themselves intensively to empower their message, Shanan does so too, but mostly paints her village neighbors, and usually within a larger picture of an outdoor scene. Abu-Roomi tends to stage her portraits in a neutral space, very colorful but not certain, focusing on the large figure itself. Her determined self-portraits displaying a different kind of an Arab woman, suggest a revised inspection of a covered or un-covered woman, present there to stand up for her word. Gender roles are being violated through Abu-Roomi's paintings of her father, questioning manhood in Muslim societies through his representative figure, which is being artistically manipulated. Shihadi creates self-portraits where she embodies a Muslim young woman, challenging traditional norms of her Muslim society, dressed in a very permissive Western manner. Bravely she presents an authentic image of herself in between the worlds. She focuses on bodily situations in which the image of the woman is depicted threatened, or in an uneasy condition.

Like Abu-Roomi, Shihadi strives to represent a broader 'Arab woman' than herself alone. Shanan challenges gender roles through relocations of the carpet. It represents the home as a whole, but also a part of it, seeking to find its place in the world, i.e. she herself. The carpet is out on a journey, displaced and disrupted. Once it is spread out in a field and another time it covers up a roof in a Druze village. The carpet is associated with both men and women. Men—since they pray on a carpet, and it is considered a central dominant element of every home, and women—since they make carpets and clean them on a daily basis. Shanan mixes up these functions of the carpet in her paintings, offering new views of that culture.

These 'double-minority' elements are reflected in the works of all three artists presented in this research. Another characteristic of their art is creating "potential spaces" in which they can bravely express a social-cultural criticism and yet keep it sublime. They create surrealistic spaces, displaced situations and encounters of images and objects, remote and symbolic depictions. All these are strategies of a "potential space" which timidly point out crucial matters of the reality they live in. As Herbert Marcuse puts it: "...a work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents...the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality, and opening the horizon of change..." (Marcuse 1978, xi).

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